

“Becoming Our Own Guinea Pigs: Awaking Consciousness and the Dawn of the Philosophical Quest”

A proposal for a collaborative qualitative research project

with *The Monroe Institute* (Faber, Virginia)

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I. BACKGROUND

“What is reality? Who and what am I? How can I discover the answers to these questions, and how can I be confident that my answers are true?”

These are the great philosophical questions. They express certain bedrock metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological concerns about the nature of the world we inhabit, the nature of our personal identity (and of human existence as such), and the possibility of validating our claims to knowledge of these ultimate realities.

Yet, where do these great philosophical questions come from? How do they arise? Who asks them, and why?

Plato famously stated that “philosophy begins in wonder” (Plato, 1949, p. 17). Some critics have pointed out that by “wonder” Plato does not mean a religious or spiritual sense of “awe,” but rather, a feeling of puzzlement over strictly intellectual problems and apparent inconsistencies in the meanings of terms (Angelo, 1998).

But these are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Indeed, quite the contrary; awesome and astonishing experiences invite and repay deep questioning, just as such questioning, when, in turn, carried to its logical conclusion, may lead to direct encounters with the mysterious, the numinous, or what Joseph Campbell calls the “invisible plane” (Campbell with Moyers, 1988, p. 71) and what Robert A. Monroe succinctly dubs “There” (in contrast to “Here”).

This dialectical loop of reason and the trans-rational was exemplified by Plato’s own mentor, Socrates, who traced the source of his own philosophical career to his

encounter (second-hand, through the eyewitness account of his friend, Chaerephon) with the god who spoke through the Oracle at Delphi, which pronounced Socrates the wisest of all the Athenians (Plato, 1956, pp. 25-6). Since Socrates did not think himself wise at all—and since the deity, being Apollo, the god of truth and prophecy, could not legitimately tell a lie—Socrates was plunged into the depths of a personal crisis in which he attempted to reconcile the god’s enigmatic pronouncement with his own far more modest sense of self.

This was not, however, a mere semantic puzzlement over the meaning of the word “wisdom”; it was an existential crisis in which the rival experiential inputs of Here and There demanded to be reconciled in a higher synthesis. It was in the cradle of this paradox that Socrates acknowledged his own quest for the true meaning and possession of wisdom was born.

Philosophy is indeed the daughter of wonder—just as Plato said.

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Perhaps because I could never recall a time in my life when I wasn’t asking versions of the great questions, I have always been fascinated by the meta-questions regarding the root source of philosophical inquiry. In other words, I am inveterately curious about the origin of my obsession.

In the 1970s, when I was just starting out my philosophical career as an undergraduate major, one of the most influential schools of thought was so-called “ordinary language philosophy,” which cited Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later work as its main inspiration. Among the chief adherents of this school (also known as “linguistic philosophy”) were such luminaries as the late Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin and, in the United States, the eminent Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell.

What these philosophers basically argued is that what I am here calling “the great questions” arise out of linguistic misunderstandings on the part of academics who torture the plain meaning of words well beyond their legitimate everyday use by ordinary speakers. Austin spoke of “dissolving” (rather than solving or addressing) “philosophical worries” by paying close attention to how words like “reality,” “seems,” “appearance” are actually used in practice (Austin, 1976, p. 5). For example, “reality” doesn’t refer to a hidden structure or dimension of existence underpinning the phenomenal realm of

sensory experience, but rather, to a quality of things in this ordinary realm: a “real” bargain is one that stands up to future examination; a “real” doctor is not an actor, a fraud, or incompetent, and so forth.

On this exceedingly narrow view, then, philosophy rests on a mistake made by self-absorbed theoreticians locked away in their ivory towers chewing on the cud of their own conceptual schemes. At worst, “the great questions” are generated by malfunctions in the overheated “left brains” of out-of-touch intellectuals too disconnected from ordinary language and everyday experience. At best, they are harmless puzzles produced by professional thinkers for their own amusement.

Of course, the irony is that the ordinary language view was itself an academic exercise, a theory of philosophical inquiry generated by intellectuals in an effort to explain away certain persistent and widespread features of human experience and the universal attempts to grapple with their meaning. I knew that I had been asking myself “the great questions” long before I was “corrupted” by my college professors. Whatever their genesis, it wasn’t something I’d picked up from my recent reading.

In further reading, however, I did come across a somewhat more plausible explanation for my philosophical obsessions. It was in Friedrich Nietzsche’s earliest work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he identifies a certain particular psychological temperament—what we might call the visionary type—as the most likely candidate for philosophical inquiry. Philosophers, he notes, are apt to feel that the everyday physical world is a kind of illusion or dream “hiding another, totally different kind of reality.” He then favorably cites Arthur Schopenhauer’s dictum to the effect that “the ability to view at certain times all men and things as mere phantoms or dream images [is] the true mark of philosophic talent” (Nietzsche, 1956, p. 20).

In other words, the true source of the philosophical quest is not a left-brained misuse or misunderstanding of language, but rather, a valiant attempt by the “left brain” to express, in linguistic form, pre-or non-linguistic perceptual or intuitional data generated by the “right brain”. This certainly seemed to fit my own case, as since earliest childhood I’d always had the sense—sometimes vivid and substantial, at other times dim and inchoate—that the physical world (though quite real in its own right) was, to borrow

Joseph Campbell's memorable phrase, "simply the foreground of a wonder" (Campbell with Moyers, 1988, p. 65).

Furthermore, this account struck me—then and now—as a much fairer, far more balanced and accurate view than that of the ordinary language philosophers, who thought of philosophy as something confined to (distorted) left-brain activity. If the genesis of the great questions lies not in the errors of a few precocious intellectuals, but in a determined effort by many to make sense of right-brained experiences that stretch the limits of reason and ordinary language, it would mean that the great questions are not the exclusive property of card-carrying, professional intellectuals. Rather, they may be found operating in the lives of all those living outside the academy walls—as we do in fact find, both in the present and in the past.

Take, for example, the late science-fiction author Philip K. Dick. Dick acknowledged being fascinated by two fundamental philosophical questions, namely, "What is reality?" and "What constitutes the authentic human being?" All of his many novels and short stories were attempts to provide answers to these questions: "What are we? What is it which surrounds us, that we call the not-me, or the empirical or phenomenal world?" (Dick, 1985, p. 2).

Another contemporary example is author (and TMI program alumnus) Bruce Moen, who says that, from earliest childhood onward, his curiosity was fueled by what he dubs "*Three Great Questions*": "Where did I come from before I was born? What am I supposed to do while I'm living here? Where do I go when I die?" (Moen, 1997, p. 24). Moen says that these questions were initially sparked by strange and vividly powerful recurring childhood daydreams (when he was six or seven years old) of being an adult man who found himself in a compromising situation with a married woman. Later he would ask whether this was a reincarnational memory of another lifetime. All of his subsequent explorations of consciousness, however, had their genesis in these early experiences and his attempts to come to terms with them.

According to the 19th century thinker, Thomas Carlyle, what I am calling the great philosophical questions are precisely those asked (and answered), in one form or another, not only by the great mystics, prophets, and spiritual heroes of all ages, but by each and every one of us, sooner or later: "What am I? What *is* this unfathomable Thing I

live in, which men name Universe? What is Life; what is Death? What am I to believe? What am I to do?" The spiritual hero, said Carlyle, is simply an individual for whom such questions have become so urgent as "to be of *infinite* moment"—everything else is mere dross (Carlyle, 1966, p. 54).

It is precisely here, in a later work, that a much more contentious Nietzsche re-enters the debate about the relationship between the (rational) left and the (non-rational) right brain, or between philosophical questioning and the expansions of consciousness sought and experienced by mystics, prophets, psychics and visionaries, both famous and anonymous. No longer did he regard these as fundamentally compatible, or even mutually reinforcing proclivities. In (the anachronistically mistranslated work) *The Gay Science*, in a lengthy paragraph entitled "As interpreters of our experiences," he acidly remarks:

One sort of honesty has been alien to all founders of religions and their kind:
They have never made their experiences a matter of conscience for knowledge.
"What did I really experience? What happened in me and around me at that time?
Was my reason bright enough? Was my will opposed to all deceptions of the
senses and bold in resisting the fantastic?" None of them has asked such
questions, nor do any of our dear religious people ask them even now. On the
contrary, they thirst after things that go against reason, and they do not wish to
make it too hard for themselves to satisfy it. So they experience "miracles" and
"rebirths" and hear the voices of little angels! But we, we others who thirst after
reason, are determined to scrutinize our experiences as severely as a scientific
experiment—hour after hour, day after day. We ourselves wish to be our
experiments and guinea pigs (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 253).

Lest we think that this charge of willful irrationalism is being reserved by Nietzsche only for the recognized prophetic founders of organized higher religions, Nietzsche's editor and translator, Princeton philosopher Walter Kaufmann, hastens to correct any and all such misperceptions in a telling footnote: "The above section is relevant not only to the interpretation of Nietzsche and the evaluation of *religious*

experiences,” writes Kaufmann, “but also to non-religious, non-denominational ‘mystical’ experiences” (in Nietzsche, 1974, p. 253 n.45).

Rather than seeing the functions usually associated with left and right brain as mutually nourishing and supportive of each other, then, Nietzsche envisions an active evasion or outright hostility toward philosophical reflection on the part of the visionary temperament. What was once joined together has now been rent asunder.

In his caustic skepticism, Nietzsche anticipates the modern “skeptical debunker” mentality. Thus, for example, there have been numerous attempts to explain (away) UFO encounters or Near Death Experiences by reducing them to strictly psychological terms, or as evidence of a psychopathological condition dubbed “the fantasy-prone personality,” which psychologist and pioneering NDE researcher Kenneth Ring defines as “the spontaneous tendency to enter into a state of rapt absorption focused on a world of self-created fantasy” (Ring, 1992, p. 114). The fantasy-prone individual is someone who remains captive of their illusions or delusions and is loath to critically examine their experiences, either for internal logical inconsistencies or external factual inaccuracies.

As I see it, however, there are two main problems with Nietzsche’s later view. In the first place, it is—unfortunately—still widespread among many influential scientific and philosophical circles. Second, it is at once both inaccurate and unfair, and therefore disguises rather than illuminates the true source of philosophical inquiry, the true value of visionary-type experiences, and the true—that is, essentially symbiotic and potentially harmonious—relationship between what are usually thought of as the right and left brain functions.

The work of Robert Monroe provides a conspicuously outstanding example of an individual who had “mystical” experiences and who willingly turned himself into a human guinea pig. *Journeys Out of the Body* (1971), *Far Journeys* (1985), and *Ultimate Journey* (1994) are the records of one who submitted himself both to outside experimental testing by psychologists and parapsychologists, as well as to a relentless inner critical self-examination in which philosophical questions such as “Is it real?” “What is reality?” and “How can I validate what I think I know?” became central, not merely to his writings, but also in his life and his life work. As Monroe’s questions deepened, so did his experiences There—which led, in turn, to greater understanding

Here. Monroe indeed followed Nietzsche's challenge and scrutinized his experiences as severely as a scientific experiment, hour after hour, day after day.

Furthermore, one could argue that with his creation and development of the Hemi-Sync binaural beat audio technology, the Hemi-Sync learning process, and The Monroe Institute, Monroe expanded the pool of willing guinea pigs to include the early laboratory Explorers, engineers and researchers, and residential program participants who voluntarily subjected themselves to experimental testing.

From my own experience in TMI programs, along with my causal observations of my fellow participants, I would say it is not merely that the binaural beat technology temporarily facilitates a more harmonious interaction between the intellectual and intuitive, or rational and non-rational hemispheres of the brain, but that the continuing and sustained effect of this synchronization is to deepen both the level and quality of experience There and thereby excite and elicit a profounder form of metaphysical and epistemological inquiry and self-inquiry Here.

Philosophy is indeed the daughter of wonder, after all—and also, paradoxically, her begetter.

II. THE PROJECT

My aim, then, is to study, in an organized and systematic fashion, the mutual interaction between the Hemi-Sync process and the process of philosophical inquiry. It is this creative synergy that interests me and is, I believe, of profound importance to the future evolution of human consciousness and the potential success or failure of our own culture to meet the challenges of this metamorphosis. TMI is a unique cultural laboratory that draws to it the very type of individuals who, consciously or not, embrace Nietzsche's challenge to become their own guinea pigs.

I would propose the creation of an open-ended questionnaire, made available to volunteers at the conclusion of their residential program(s) that would ask participants to identify:

- (i) The kinds of philosophical concerns and inner experiences that might have led them to take the program

- (ii) The kinds of philosophical questions that arose in the course of their program (e.g., “Is it ‘real’ or am I ‘just making it up?’” “What are these ‘entities’ I am perceiving?” etc.)
- (iii) How they addressed these questions to their own satisfaction
- (iv) How they saw the relationship between their experiences in the various Focus states and the philosophical questions that arose in their efforts to interpret and understand those experiences

I would also ask the volunteers to re-submit their responses to a follow-up survey (asking essentially the same questions) after a six-month interval.

The period of initial data collection would be limited to a six-month period.

My hope is that certain recurring patterns might emerge that would enable the identification of certain common themes, or perhaps a “core experience” whose elements could then be further analyzed. The final report might take the form of an article, several book chapters, or perhaps be the subject of a book-length treatment, depending upon the scope and depth of the responses.

I would consult with TMI in formulating the survey and all necessary release forms. My plan would be to place the survey on my web site (which is currently undergoing renovation) and have an informational flyer distributed to program participants describing the nature and purpose of the research project and inviting their voluntary cooperation. The program participants would presumably come from a cross section of programs including *Gateway*, *Lifeline*, *Guidelines*, etc.

Since the survey form would be on my web site, there would be no postage or printing costs for the Institute (except, perhaps, for the informational flyer to be included in the program participants’ registration packet). If the project is approved by TMI, my intention is to apply for a sabbatical (either half or whole year) from my college in order to have sufficient time to collect and analyze the data and to further my research. During that time period, I would also be available for periodic visits to the Institute for consultation with the Director of Research and discussion of the project. Thus the principal costs for research would not be borne by the Institute.

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